

If there was no Psalm 58 or psalms like it in the psalter, our spirituality would be distorted.¹ The absence of a credible outcry against sin and injustice is itself evil. Silence in the face of sin is inexcusable and provokes its own kind of outrage. To wish for evil to go unnoticed and unchecked – free of any consequence, is to be guilty of complicity. If we do not express our horror at the violence and injustice we are unwitting accomplices in acts of terror perpetrated against our fellow sinners. Psalm 58 is not a problem. It is a Spirit-inspired perspective on human depravity, its cruel nature, its necessary judgment, and its ultimate defeat.

The willed passivity described in Psalm 57 depends upon the emotional outrage of Psalm 58. It is totally true that we are evil – evil to the core and sinners from birth (Ps 51:5). But it is wrong to feel uncomfortable with the vehemence of the psalmist’s outrage. We are all sinners. We have all fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). Our hearts are desperately wicked (Jer 17:9). This is all true, most assuredly, but to relativize atrocities in the name of original sin is to minimize the horrendous consequences of social and systemic evil. It is not because we are sinless that we condemn sin; it is because we are forgiven sinners saved by grace that we raise an outcry against evil and injustice.

The person who excuses sin by saying, “everybody’s doing it,” is a person looking for approval and self-justification. It is wrong to challenge the psalmist by saying, “Let him who has no sin cast the first stone,” as if he is somehow exonerating himself by condemning others. It is indeed a true statement to say, “Whenever we confront a wrongdoer, no matter how evil, we are looking in a mirror,”² but it is not the best thing to say to a survivor of genocide or a rape victim or an abused wife or a parent who just lost their children in a drive-by-shooting. The psalmist’s moral outrage is predicated on his own repentance and restoration (Ps 51), for which “he has only God to thank.”³ But David’s personal salvation is not the immediate issue in view. His outrage against evil is the pressing concern. It is right and good that the psalmist makes his case against evil, calls down curses on the wicked, and looks to God to vindicate the righteous. Of all people, only Christians can truly embrace this psalm.

“You snakes!”

*Do you rulers indeed speak justly?
Do you judge people with equity?
No, in your heart you devise injustice,
and your hands met out violence on the earth.
Even from birth the wicked go astray;
from the womb they are wayward, spreading lies.
Their venom is like the venom of a snake,
like that of a cobra that has stopped its ears,
that will not heed the tune of the charmer,
however skillful the enchanter may be.*

Psalm 58:1-5

¹ Wilcock, Psalms, 209. Wilcock reports that the 1980 Service Book excused Anglicans from ever having to use Psalm 58 in worship.

² Keller, The Songs of Jesus, 123.

³ Kidner, Psalms, 209

The psalmist asks God to neutralize the unnamed perpetrators of injustice, the mighty ones who should be making just decisions, but are not. David's outrage is kept impersonal on purpose. He doesn't need to name names or spell it out. God knows who's who. Nor does he take matters into his own hands. He does not act; he prays. Only God is in a position to execute judgment and bring about justice. The "rulers" or "top dogs" or "little masters of the universe" are all those who are in a position of authority. They may be officials, politicians, leaders, educators, administrators, lawyers, judges, officers, pastors, supervisors, bosses, managers, executives, parents, grandparents, etc. Anyone who is entrusted with the responsibility of seeing that the right thing is done, whose task is to bring about justice and equity, whose role is to protect the innocent and vulnerable from violence, and whose calling is to pursue justice and judge the wicked.

There is a striking contrast between the heart that is steadfast in Psalm 57 and the heart that is deceptive in Psalm 58. The psalmist freely traces the roots of evil and injustice right to the heart of those who undoubtedly felt hidden behind their institutional responsibilities and professional loyalties. It is easy to feel a few steps removed from the responsibility and the blame for turning a blind eye to injustice. The school principal doesn't actually bully kids, he just doesn't do anything to prevent it. The hospital administrator knows that irregularities in billing penalize the patient, but in his heart it's too much trouble to fix. The doctor serves her patient well, but in her heart let's the system over-charge for her services. The pastor shows favoritism to the wealthy parishioner and caters to his special needs, knowing in his heart that if he doesn't he may lose his support. The manufacturer knows his company's product is highly flammable but in his heart he doesn't want to be a "whistle blower." The psalmist knows that the "rulers" who devise injustice in their hearts and use evil to enhance their power may never see their victims face to face. They may never meet, but they are as guilty of violence as if they had physically punched and kicked their victims. Their wilful acts of evil are hidden under "standing operating procedure" and "how they've always done it."

The last time Jesus went to the temple he was outraged at the teachers of the law and Pharisees. He called them religious hypocrites and like the prophet Isaiah before him pronounced seven woes against them (Matthew 23:13-36; see Isaiah 5:8-6:5). He accused them of being blind guides and turning people away from God. He railed against them, "You hypocrites . . . full of greed and self-indulgence." He even called them snakes causing one to wonder if Psalm 58 was not one of his sources. "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?" (Matthew 23:33). Like the perpetrators of injustice in Psalm 58, Jesus claimed the Pharisees were steeped in sin "from birth." They were of their father the devil and they had stopped listening to God long ago (John 8:43-44). Like a cobra that no longer responded to the vibrations of the enchanter's flute, the Pharisees were unable to hear what Jesus said.⁴

⁴ Kidner, *Psalms*, 209. Kidner quotes G. S. Cansdale, who writes, "It is now agreed that all snakes are deaf, . . . and the charmer holds their attention by the movement of his pipe, not its music" (G. S. Cansdale, *Animals of Bible Lands* (Paternoster, 1970), 206. Astrid Riecken writes, "Scientists have long struggled to understand how snakes, which lack external ears, sense sounds. Now, a new study shows that sound waves cause vibrations in a snake's skull that are then "heard" by the inner ear." Astrid Riecken, *The Washington Post* (https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/how-snakes-hear-without-ears/2011/12/29/gIQAuseoWP_story.html?utm_term=.ae5272243dc0).

Seven Curses

*Break the teeth of their mouths, O God;
Lord, tear out the fangs of those lions!
Let them vanish like the water that flows away;
when they draw the bow, let their arrows fall short.
May they be like a slug that melts away as it moves along,
like a stillborn child that never sees the sun.
Before your pots can feel the heat of the thorns –
whether they be green or dry – the wicked will be swept away.
The righteous will be glad when they are avenged,
when they dip their feet in the blood of the wicked.*

Psalm 58:6-10

Seven graphic images capture the psalmist's prayer to bring the wicked to justice and to end their reign. Drawing on his creative skill, the poet paints a picture of evil rendered powerless. For all their bravado and clout, the wicked end up like a defanged lion, run-off waste water, a stray arrow, snail slime, an early miscarriage, tumble weed blowing in the wind, and a bloody pool of battlefield remains. The impact of this horrendous seven-fold description reduces evil to a pitiful insignificance. What was once a grave threat has been reduced to nothing. Evil's agents are no longer to be feared.

If we “modern Christians living in reasonable comfort do not like the violence of the way the Scriptures talk about these matters”⁵ it may be because we do not sufficiently identify with our brothers and sisters around the world who suffer injustice and oppression. Patrick Reardon writes, “This psalm is chock full of hatred – hatred of evil, arrogance, injustice, and hardness of heart.”⁶ The evocative nature of the psalm shares God's passion against evil. The apostle echoes the sentiment of the psalm, “Hate what is evil; cling to what is good” (Rom 12:9).

Vindication

*Then people will say,
“Surely the righteous still are rewarded;
surely there is a God who judges the earth.”*

Psalm 58:11

God's administration of justice will bring joy to the people of God (“The righteous will be glad when they are avenged”) and in the end everyone will recognize that God is just and righteous and rewards those who do his will. Calvin insisted that this rejoicing was “under the influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit” and was perfectly consistent with the mercy of God. It had nothing to do with that “cruel satisfaction which too many feel when they see their enemies destroyed.” The righteous rejoicing over the judgment of God had nothing to do with the “unholy passions of hatred, anger, or impatience, inducing an inordinate desire of revenge.”⁷

Commenting on Psalm 58, Spurgeon emphasized that the righteous “will have no hand in meting

⁵ Goldingay, Psalms, 209.

⁶ Reardon, Christ in the Psalms, 114.

⁷ Calvin, Psalms, 377-378.

out, neither will he rejoice in the spirit of revenge, but his righteous soul shall acquiesce in the judgments of God, and he shall rejoice to see justice triumphant.” Spurgeon added, “There is nothing in Scripture of that sympathy with God's enemies which modern traitors are so fond of parading as the finest species of benevolence. We shall at the last say, ‘Amen,’ to the condemnation of the wicked, and feel no disposition to question the ways of God with the impenitent. . . .The damnation of sinners shall not mar the happiness of saints.”⁸

It is hard to imagine a world where there will be no more corruption or oppression and where God’s rule and reign will establish the righteous order of the new heaven and the new earth. Psalm 58 anticipates the end of evil and human injustice. The wars, killings, rapes, and abortions will come to an end. The gang violence, the school massacres, the threat of nuclear annihilation, and the trading in human cargo will end. The adultery, abandonment, abuse, and divorce will end. The lies, slander, deception, manipulation, will end. The fraud, greed, bribes, and kickbacks will end. The addictions, obsessions, fixations, and perversions will end. The gluttony and starvation will end. All evil will one day end once and for all, and what a day of rejoicing that will be.⁹

But the end of evil is only part of the story. God’s provision of redemption and reconciliation precedes God’s judgment of sin and death. Salvation takes precedence over judgment, because God “is not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). God in his grace entered into our world of injustice and evil and took upon himself the judgment we deserve. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole’” (Deut 21:23). The truth is clear, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” but it is also true, “all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:23-24).

The psalmist is right to pray down judgment on the wicked. He wants to render the wicked powerless. He pictures a defanged lion, run-off waste water, a stray arrow, a slimy snail, a tragic miscarriage, desert scrub brush blowing in the wind, and a bloody pool of battlefield remains. But when we pray Psalm 58, we know that Jesus Christ suffered crucifixion, the most despicable and most dehumanizing capital punishment the Romans could imagine. But even beyond that, he was completely forsaken and totally abandoned by the Father because of us. Instead of being honored, he was condemned; instead of being praised, he was accused. “Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him” (Isa 53:10). Jesus’ cry from the cross embraces and comprehends all the lamentations of all God's people throughout all of time. All other cries of anguish, all other “Gethsemanes,” all other “Golgothas” look to this moment for resolution. It is as if Jesus literally gathered up all the lamentations of God's people and shouted them from the cross in a loud voice.¹⁰ We cannot pray Psalm 58 without remembering the full story of salvation and judgment.

⁸ Spurgeon, Treasury of David, Psalm 58, on line

⁹ Webster, Follow the Lamb, 222-224.

¹⁰ Webster, The God Who Prays, 149.